

10-14-93

Shortgrass Country

Two or three weeks ago, the tax fixer explained the drouth relief provisions of the new tax code. About half of the rules fitted dryland ranching. Until he brought up the requirement that two-thirds of the adjusted gross income of the taxpayer had to be from agriculture to qualify for a one year deferral of livestock sales, he'd lost the audience's attention.

But introducing the possibility of making money on something besides a sheep or a cow perked us up, and we began to listen. I knew for sure if I had other income, the closest I'd come to a drouth deferral was to put off draining the swimming pool to go trout fishing in the Rocky Mountains.

For at least 40 tax deadlines around coffee houses, various herders have set the tone grumbling about the I.R.S. refusing to allow them to keep on being ranchers after a big oil strike on their place, or a huge gas well coming in on their wife's farm in Oklahoma. The best the most thoughtful table of coffee drinkers could offer was sympathy for such a horrible economic disability.

Ten or 15 grand a month royalty checks, or the more likely sum of a thousand or 1500 bucks' worth of extra income works well added to the profit from a pen of thin rind Okie calves, or a trap full of wool-blind lambs, regardless of what the owner's occupation comes out on a tax form.

Until the county clerk's office in San Angelo put up a sign saying cash only for marriage licenses, marrying a rich widow was a second way to mess up a herder's tax status and change it plenty quick. However, after reading the meaning into the restrictions on paying for a marriage license, rich people's business must be way off at the court house, or the clerk would be honoring gold Master Card and platinum American Express cards.

Fussing about who the I.R.S. thinks you are sounds foolish, but settling who you are is an important thing. Policemen, I've heard, have to haul in scores of hombres who think they are the invisible man or the mayor's son-in-law. At big rodeo and steer roping dances, close to midnight lots of guys start thinking they are handsome bronc riders holding adoring movie stars against their chests. But those temporary masquerades fade away on Monday morning when they pack their lunch to go to stoke the furnace over at the foundry, or on their way out to the truck stop to grind diesel all day.

The common defense for year after year fighting the hollow horn and woolie trade is "ranching isn't a business, it's a way of life."

In spite of how touching those words are when a mother is comforting her 45 year-old son, no currency or coin pays the bearer for a way of life. No economic transaction or bond coupon bases assumption or redemption on the owner's way of life. Be safe to bet supermarkets and utility companies also don't care which way life is headed as long as life is backed by a balance down at the bank.

My bookkeeper says technically we are investors who always take the wrong end of the odds. He's worth listening to because he's never yet bet a dime on a stocker cow, and like all successful men, works by the hour and not by the crop.